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## Emily Dickinson and "Dimity Convictions"

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Emily Dickinson was a poet *and* (this matter is often forgotten) a woman. Only from a woman's vocabulary is there a phrase so undeniably suited to the description of "These Gentlewomen" as possessed of "Dimity Convictions" in the poem "What Soft — Cherubic Creatures —." To those who have never worn, nor sewed, nor ironed dimity, the dictionary definition — a "fine, thin, corded cotton fabric" — is inadequate or misleading.

Any woman of the nineteenth century would have been familiar with dimity, would have realized that the chief characteristic distinguishing it from other cotton fabrics is the straight, narrow cord at even intervals throughout the length of the bolt. There is no deviation, no irregularity, then, in "dimity" convictions. Dimity is also associated with femininity. One with dimity convictions must recoil in horror from any prospect of encountering some aspect of "freckled Human Nature." Anyone with dimity convictions is — even to one of a "Fisherman's — Degree" — always and unquestionably a lady. Here is a typical Dickinsonian turn of mind in the matter of Christian charity.

Dimity is also known for its crispness. Consequently dimity convictions are durable, retaining their starched perfection through many scrubblings on a washboard and boilings in an iron pot. Neither one's own nor another's sufferings ever soften or crumple precepts within this metaphor. In fact one might reasonably expect to remain virtually unchanged during a lifetime. Although dimity is durable, it is a very thin, almost transparent, cloth. Dimity convictions are not so transparent as those of organdy or voile; they can never be considered revealing or daring, and they evince neither luster nor depth. A material that is thin, durable, and feminine might seem ideal for a lady's convictions, but dimity also scratches. No lady is very comfortable wearing dimity close to her skin. Those who have worn it realize that, especially when the climate is warm, they must interpose a softer garment between the crisp, if light, fabric and the body. A final attribute of dimity that renders it a subtle metaphoric vehicle for convictions is its coolness. It is suitable for balmy days, but when winter comes one whose convictions are of this substance must withdraw or freeze.

DIMITY CONVICTIONS

For these reasons the phrase "Dimity Convictions" perfectly describes Emily Dickinson's gentlewomen. Two words well known to Victorian ladies, but hardly understood in the wash-and-wear era, express the multiple ironies in her portrayal.